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ADDISON IN YOUNG'S *CONJECTURES*

The long digression at the end of the *Conjectures on Original Composition in a Letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison*, in which Young embalms the famous report regarding the exemplary end made by Addison (the moral lustre of which Horace Walpole did his cynical best to tarnish), has given rise to much groping speculation. Why, it is asked, did he labor the passage to the extent of twelve pages; and why did he tack it on as a tail-piece to a "letter"?

In the absence of direct evidence, the answer to these questions must, in the nature of the case be pretty largely conjectural. It is in this sense that I put forward the following considerations.

On the appearance of Night IV of *The Complaint* there was supplied a general preface, in which it was stated that "the occasion of the poem was real, not fictitious." That little statement, I believe, indirectly forced the publication of the death-bed passage sixteen years later. As I have tried to show elsewhere,¹ the reading public seized upon the most affecting incident in the poem, the interment of Narcissa, as the "real" occasion referred to, and, vaguely remembering his family bereavements, built up about the poet a legend of grief and personal affliction that hardly withstands the impact of facts. The true "real" occasion was the sudden, unexpected death at Bath, April 23, 1740, of the poet Thomas Tickell, whom M. Walter Thomas, Professor of English Literature at the University of Lyons, identifies as the Philander of the poem.² It was Tickell, it will be remembered, who confided the death-bed report to Young, as recorded in the *Conjectures*, and so furnished him with what I believe to be the real subject of the *Night Thoughts*.

Read in the light of this idea, the following passage from the *Conjectures* takes on a new significance:

"How finely pathetic are those two lines, which this so solemn scene inspired?"

¹ *Pub. Mod. Lang. Assn.* xxxiv, 130 ff.

² *Le Poète Edward Young*, Chap. vi, pp. 147-9. This is an admirable study and deserves to be more widely known.

'He taught us how to live: and oh! too high
 A price for knowledge, taught us how to die.'
 —*Tickell.*

"With truth wrapped in darkness, so sung our oracle to the public, but explained himself to me: He was present at his patron's death, and that account of it here given, he gave me before his eyes were dry: *By what means Addison taught us how to die, the poet left to be made known by a late and less able hand.*"

The words that I have italicized appear to me to be a direct reference to the *Night Thoughts*, and the following passages seem to me to bear out this view.

On other themes I'll dwell.

Themes, too, the genuine growth
 Of dear Philander's dust. He thus, though dead
 May still befriend—What themes? Time's wondrous price,
 Death, friendship, and Philander's final scene.

On this, or similar, Philander! thou
 Whose mind was moral, as the preacher's tongue;
 And strong to wield all science worth the name;
 How often we talked down the summer sun,
 And cooled our passions by the breezy stream!
 How often thawed and shortened winter's eve,
 By conflict kind that struck out latent truth,
 Best found, so sought.

His flight Philander took! his upward flight,
 If ever soul ascended. He had dropped,
 (That eagle genius) O had he let fall
 One feather as he flew; I then had wrote,
 What friends might flatter; prudent foes forbear;
 Rivals scarce damn; and Zoilus reprieve.
 Yet what I can, I must; it were profane
 To quench a glory lighted at the skies,
 And cast in shadow his illustrious close.
 Strange! the theme most affecting, most sublime,
 Momentous most to man, should sleep unsung!
 And yet it sleeps, by genius unawak'd,
 Panim or Christian; to the blush of wit
 Man's highest triumph! man's profoundest fall!
The death-bed of the just! is yet undrawn
By mortal hand! it merits a divine:
Angels should paint it, angels ever there:
There on a post of honour, and of joy.

Dare I presume, then? but Philander bids;

And glory tempts, and inclination calls—

I pause—

And enter, aw'd, the temple of my theme.

Is it his death-bed? No: it is his shrine.

Night II.

The italics in the above passage are mine.

For know I'm but executor; he left

This moral legacy; I make it o'er

By his [Philander's] command; Philander hear in me;

And heaven in both. . . .

Night IX.

Surely, without actually naming the source, never was poet more explicit regarding the genesis and subject of his work. The real occasion of the poem, he says in effect, was the death of Tickell; the subject, a legacy from Tickell, the exemplary end of the Christian as illustrated by the death of Addison.

But the public had somewhat missed the point of the poem. They saw in it chiefly a series of moral reflections growing out of the successive family losses of the priestly and witty satirist. The report had remained locked in the poet's breast. He owed it both to the living and to the dead to set the public right, to draw aside "the long-closed curtain of Addison's death-bed" and reveal his "grand work," a "monument more durable than those of marble." However, after allowing the public to enjoy its own interpretation so long uncorrected, the poet could scarcely issue a separate work baldly setting forth the facts. Bernard Shaw might have done such a thing, but not Young. What better, then, than to seize the opportunity to bring it in incidentally (in the Baconian sense), and let the truth steal upon the public unawares? Just the opportunity he needed, he found in the "letter" to his friend Richardson, as the following passage would seem to indicate:

"Yet had not this poor plank (permit me, here, so to call this imperfect page) been thrown out, the chief article of his patron's glory [i. e., Addison's] would probably have been sunk forever, and late ages have received but a fragment of his fame. . . . Let us look farther to that concluding scene, which spoke human nature not unrelated to the divine. To that let us pay the long and large arrears of our greatly posthumous applause."

HORACE W. O'CONNOR.

University of Chicago.